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## Viewing cable 08MOSCOW1215, MORE FROM THE RUMOR MILL: READING PUTIN'S

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### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#08MOSCOW1215**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
<a href="#">08MOSCOW1215</a>	<a href="#">2008-04-30 14:14</a>	<a href="#">2011-08-30 01:44</a>	<a href="#">CONFIDENTIAL</a>	<a href="#">Embassy Moscow</a>

Appears in these articles:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 001215

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/29/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: MORE FROM THE RUMOR MILL: READING PUTIN'S  
PRE-INAUGURATION SIGNALS

REF: MOSCOW 1187 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: CDA Daniel Russell: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Among some Kremlin-critics and establishment figures, speculation has grown over the past

month that Putin and his entourage may be laying the groundwork for a return to the Kremlin, rather than safe-guarding the transition of President-elect Medvedev. While our contacts speculate that Putin has kept his political options open, some point to his self-conceived "historic mission" to return Russia to its former glory, concerns over a rapacious and self-devouring elite, and distrust of Medvedev's long-term ambitions as fueling recent maneuvers to further entrench the out-going president's powers. Acknowledging Medvedev's personal loyalty to Putin, observers point to competition among staff and rumors over Mrs. Medvedev's ambitions for her husband. Rumors notwithstanding, little of this speculation has a factual underpinning, but it does reflect continual nervousness among the elite about Putin's intentions and the fate of the tandemocracy. Putin's intentions and actions have rarely (if ever) been correctly forecast over the past year by Moscow's political elite. End Summary

Putin: Once and Future President?

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12. (C) Some Moscow politicians and Kremlin watchers are reading post-electoral and pre-inaugural political maneuvers (ref a) as signs of the possibility that Putin could return to the Kremlin, either at the end of Medvedev's term or -- in the event of underperformance or disloyalty -- before. As Kremlin opponent xxxxx told the Ambassador, Putin's continued domination of political life, the focus on his transition to the White House (rather than on Medvedev's shift to Putin's Kremlin office), the possible creation of a Cabinet-like host of Deputy Prime Ministers, and Putin's decision to take up leadership of the ruling party, has fueled theories that Putin could be keeping his options open to return as President. Putin's xxxxx and others have stressed, is how to override the political predisposition that leads Russians to look to the Kremlin (whether to the Tsar or the General Secretary) for authority. As president, xxxxx argued, Medvedev's stature will be enhanced both constitutionally and psychologically.

13. (C) Acknowledging today's shift in political speculation away from the hypothesis that Putin would serve a limited period as Prime Minister in order to safeguard Medvedev's transition, prominent xxxxx argued that Putin's decision to lead United Russia was about protecting his own interests, and not those of Medvedev. Absent a pre-existing gentleman's agreement with the President-elect, xxxxx characterized Putin's choreography of the last several weeks as a "humiliation" of his successor. xxxxx told us that, based on blowback from Kremlin ideological guru Vladislav Surkov over critical xxxxx articles, it was clear to him that "Putin wants to be the leading guy." As an example of Kremlin sensitivities, xxxxx pointed to Surkov's quick intervention in the wake of an NG article that described Medvedev's prospective rule as a period of liberal thaw. Because the term "thaw" connotes Khrushchev's initial reign, xxxxx noted, it begged the question of "who was Stalin" and implied that change was needed, rather than the continuation of Putin's course.

Putin's Historic Mission, Internecine Clans

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14. (C) Pointing to Putin's sense of historical mission in returning Russia to its previous world power status, analysts tell us that intra-elite divisions remain too poisonous and the prospect for elite conflict too great for Putin to remove himself from a power construct that he (and not a system of checks and balances) polices. xxxxx who also serves on Medvedev's think tank, questioned why Putin sought "dictatorial powers" over the party, given his preexisting de facto command of United Russia. His decision was "alarming," xxxxx claimed, because it demonstrated the uncertainty that exists in Putin's entourage over the political transition, despite the fact that "all executive powers will be shared between Putin and Medvedev" and the government

machinery will be "as focused on Putin, if not more."  
xxxxx separately suggested that Putin's party leadership was an additional layer of protection should Medvedev become too confident with the presidential perquisites and seek to modify Putin's imprimatur.

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15. (C) As a long-time advocate of a third presidential term for Putin, xxxxx editor xxxxx told us that Putin had been hemmed in by his desire for international legitimacy, even though amending the Russian constitution to remove term limits would have been "easy and understandable in the context of Russia's stage of political development." xxxxx speculated that the de facto rejiggering of power between the Kremlin and White House was awkward, but necessary, given Putin's self-imposed requirement of respecting the Russian constitution. While xxxxx argued that the concentration of power was a "temporary phase" in a "long, very long" evolution to more democratic institutions, liberal critics like former Duma deputy xxxxx see the accumulation of power -- with Putin in "de facto and de jure control over the club of the top administrative and economic nomenclature" -- as an end in itself. As xxxxx noted, the flurry of presidential orders shifting Kremlin staff to White House positions in advance of Putin becoming Prime Minister on May 8 were an interesting reflection of Putin's mentality: rather than have "little Dima" sign the presidential decrees authorizing the transfer of cadre, Putin continued to dictate the terms of his premier-ship, revealing how lopsided this partnership will be at the outset.

16. (C) Amidst the political uncertainty, the idea of Russia evolving into a parliamentary republic is battled around, but mostly battled down. While both xxxxx and RAO UES and SPS opposition party deputy xxxxx were at a loss to explain Putin's decision to head United Russia absent a strategy based on constitutionally reconfiguring Russia's political system, each conceded Putin's public opposition to the idea. Given Putin's domination of politics since Medvedev's March 2 electoral win, many viewed his comments at the one-year memorial of former President Yeltsin's death, that the presidency would "continue to serve the Russian people and protect (Russia's) sovereign interests," as significant. xxxxx confirmed to us that during the course of his xxxxx with Medvedev, the President-elect was insistent that Russia required a presidential system and dismissive of public speculation over the "tandem."

17. (C) xxxxx while discounting the role of opposition parties at present, warned against GOR policies that created competition between bureaucrats rather than parties. While Russia was not a democracy, xxxxx maintained that it was on a path that could lead to democracy, but only if more pluralism was built into the system. The problem with the ruling party's self-conscious imitation of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, with its creation of "clubs," he stressed, was that United Russia lacked intra-party ideological coherence and competition. At the end of the day, it would not matter what liberal United Russia Duma deputy Pligin thought, but rather how the Kremlin told him to vote that would determine the outcome of any Duma contest. The challenge for Medvedev, xxxxx posited, will be to reintroduce faith in the system among middle class voters, who stayed home or spoiled their ballot, that their voice matters. It is that portion of the electorate, xxxxx stressed, that the government will need to rely upon for support for economic modernization.

Staff and Spousal Ambitions  
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18. (C) The maneuvering begs the question of what Putin and his entourage could possibly fear in the reflexively loyal Medvedev. Ekspert magazine speculated that the mere

formation of an economic think-tank (ref b) by the President-elect had been enough to raise concerns of a rival team and vision. When asked, xxxxx did not dispute the analysis, acknowledging that between the outgoing and incoming presidents' staff there were elements of competition. Even on minor issues, such as extending press invitations for the inauguration, xxxxx said that confusion over lines of authority had led to delay. United Russia Duma deputy and Kremlin spin-doctor Sergey Markov admitted to us that the transition had produced legislative and political paralysis, with everyone "waiting for directions" on how to work with the tandem.

¶9. (C) The role of Medvedev's wife, Svetlana, in generating tensions between the camps remains the subject of avid gossip. xxxxx hinting at Svetlana's reputation for aggressive social climbing, xxxxx was less discrete, calling her a "stupid and ambitious" woman, who purportedly had already drawn up a list of officials who should "suffer" for their betrayal of

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Medvedev when First Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov was ascendant.

Comment  
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¶10. (C) In the absence of facts, speculation is driving Moscow political currents. While it will be months before we get a better sense of the division of labor between Medvedev and Putin, the sense here is that the pre-inaugural atmospherics have diminished, rather than buttressed Medvedev's political stature and fueled nervousness among Moscow's hyper-sensitive political elite as to whether the succession question has been definitively resolved. Putin has been master of the political surprise over the past year and consistently bamboozled the chattering class and pundits as to his long-term intentions.  
Russell